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Running for health or in the pursuit of happiness?

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As I approach my 50th birthday, hampered by a long standing and mysterious injury which is preventing me from running comfortably and for much more than 30 minutes, I cannot help reflecting with envy on the Master long distance runners and track athletes whom I interviewed almost 10 years ago for my PhD on the sociology of ageing. These athletes shared their experiences with me in the course of long and enjoyable interviews. The key message I retained from these interviews has not changed over the 10 years I've spent analysing the data, publishing it, discussing it with others and using it as the basis for a wider research programme on physical activity and later life.

I will spare the reader the suspense and let on straightaway what the key message contained in my research informants' accounts was. Why do they run? They run to run. Not for health, or appearance, not as an anti-ageing technique, simply to run. What does this mean? Why is this remarkable? What qualities did the athletes discover in themselves in the course of their long careers as Masters and what can we learn from these experiences, for the management of bodily ageing and wider attitudes towards older people?

Let's think about bodily ageing briefly. We live in a society obsessed by physical and functional perfection. I don't mean necessarily the obsession with narrow hips and large breasts that female celebrities have recently promoted or the sculpted male body embodied by actors and celebrity sportsmen. This is only a manifestation of a bigger phenomenon – the requirement that we, as individuals, control our bodies to maintain optimal functioning and appearance for as long as possible. We have to control what we eat, how much physical activity we take, how much sleep we take, how much time we spend in the sun, our alcohol and smoking habits, all of this in order to 'age well'. Why? To attain personal well-being, to avoid being labelled as old and useless but also to ease the 'burden' of population ageing. It is our individual responsibility to age well and healthily and it is a body problem. Who wants to be old and sick? So there appears to be a happy meeting of interests – our own to remain fit and healthy for as long as possible, and that of governments, to minimize the costs of population ageing.

However, were we to monitor everything we do according to health promotion messages, we wouldn't have much time for anything else and time is not available to all equally and equitably. Further, it would be easy to promote running in later life as part of this health promotion movement, where running would be put in the service of good health, ageing well and long life. But when Master runners train regularly, they are engaged in an altogether different project, which, I would argue, shows the path to a different mode of ageing, based on the cultivation of freedom, the pursuit of self-discovery, balanced by the development of intergenerational relations.

The 21 men and women whom I interviewed were aged between 48 and 86, although the majority was in their 50s and 60s. They all lived in the central belt of Scotland (Edinburgh, Glasgow and various towns in between, notorious for poor health outcomes and the worst life expectancy in Europe) and they all belonged to a club. They had all

been active athletes for at least 15 years, training and competing regularly. Even the 86-year-old took part in the Scottish Veteran Harriers Club (SVHC)¹ 10km race every year, alternating running and walking. How they had become athletes was interesting. Some had started at school in track and field and then at some point changed to long distance. The oldest ones had started as long distance runners racing for prize money. The bulk had started as mature adults (aged 26+) during what they called the Marathon Boom of the 1980s. This is when most of the younger women started, the ones starting as track and field athletes remaining so throughout their lives. The Marathon Boom made long distance running popular with both middle class and working class people, and those who forged a running career after running their first marathon took their training very seriously, according to a very strict schedule: out 6 times per week, mixing speed, recovery and long runs, using winter runs as recovery from the competition season which runs from spring to autumn. Two women were ultra runners, which meant that they raced distances exceeding marathons, using shorter races as preparation. One of them ran in the West Highland Way race² non-stop (95 miles or 130km) from the outskirts of Glasgow to Fort William in the Highlands. Her husband provided back-up. The other one measured a 1-mile circuit starting and finishing at home, so that she could run 10+ miles whilst keeping an eye on her children during the school holidays. A 71-year-old man continued to run 70-80 miles a week despite a heart attack and a warning by his doctor to avoid running marathons (he ignored the warning). To his wife's disappointment, holidays continued to be organised around races, usually in exotic places such as Tenerife. A 65-year-old man had married a second time, a much younger woman whom he trained to be a runner. She went on to become a much better runner than him, to his great satisfaction, and a mentor to other trainee runners.

I've already alluded to ill-health. These athletes were all survivors. They had overcome injury, accidents and some of them fatal illness such as heart disease and strokes. A common feature was a distrust of doctors, who, they argued, tried to discourage them from running, in one case refusing to x-ray what turned out to be a fractured leg! Why did they do it? Out in all weathers, aware that it took longer to recover from hard training, illness or injury, sometimes taking risks with their health and with their lives?

One man described feeling the wind in his face, running cross country or on roads, at an easy and relaxed pace, admiring the views of the countryside. Another man described the camaraderie of running in groups and leaving their footsteps in the snow during a hard winter run. They all described the sensations of their bodies in motion, the satisfaction of controlling their movements, of feeling present in the world, of being able to overcome fatigue during a hard race. Racing presented an excellent opportunity to travel (e.g. to Morocco or Antarctica) and to discover parts of Scotland which would otherwise had remained unknown (e.g. running coast to coast). Of course ill-health and injury did curtail athletic careers. For instance, since I conducted these interviews, the 86-year-old died aged 91, another got a second heart attack and reduced his training to 15 miles per week, a third had a stroke and developed Parkinson's Disease. However only death

¹ The Scottish Veteran Harriers Club, now known as the Scottish Masters Athletics, is an organisation (rather than a Club) which takes care of the needs of Master runners in Scotland. It runs its own competitions, hosts international meetings and publishes a regular newsletter, in exchange for yearly subscriptions. <http://scottishmastersathletics.webnode.com/>

² <http://www.westhighlandwayrace.org/>

stopped them in their tracks completely. The others had other pleasures – cycling, jogging, walking, being active in their running club, writing for newsletters, travelling and of course training younger athletes.

So what can we learn from these runners? Maintaining good health and postponing the decrements of ageing, although important factors, was not the reason why they did it. They were a happy by-product rather than the primary motivation for running. Subjecting themselves to rigorous training was not designed to maximise what bodily potential they had at their disposal to enable them to put their shoes on and go out in the great outdoors whenever they felt like it, the only constraint being the racing calendar dictating what markers they had to attain to perform well and family obligations.

They exercised their freedom to achieve happiness through physical exhaustion, to risk their lives by shunning medical advice and to establish a dialogue with their bodies to decide whether or not to run and how much of it to do. Of course sometimes their bodies played tricks on them, which just goes to show that we can never have complete control over them. Sport is not just an activity for the pursuit of national glory or individual health. It can be done to achieve freedom and happiness, to discover things about ourselves which surprise and satisfy us. It is one excellent way of remaining in contact with younger people and forging long lasting friendships. All these are worth considering as we all contemplate our futures as old and very old people.

Having said that, sport can also be a tyranny and it certainly exposes inequalities in our society – of gender, class, age and of course race. To forge an acceptable ethic of life in old age, one need not engage in competitive sport – walking can produce similar outcomes. The responsibility does not lie solely with individual older people though. It must be a collective endeavour where, as a society, we reflect on how best to unlock the potential for lifelong happiness, even in the very late years. The pursuit of freedom and happiness requires some disciplining and time. And the time in particular has to be negotiated so that it is not taken at the expense of another's happiness. It is definitely not a purely individual endeavour: spouses play a crucial role in this project and their own happiness must not be sacrificed in the process. Wives in particular risk having their own happiness curtailed by their husbands' activities. So they must work out clearly what their ethic of life is and bring it to bear in family negotiations of time.